

Global Compact on Migration: Multi-stakeholder dialogue

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As recognized in the New York Declaration, the drivers of displacement and migration in the 21st century are complex, and increasingly include natural disasters, food insecurity, and other adverse effects of climate change. The goal of my presentation is not only to discuss how climate change acts to drive displacement and migration, but also suggest opportunities the GCM (and the GCR) present to effectively adapt the current legal and operational frameworks to safeguard the human rights of affected migrants and displaced persons.

The primary challenge in addressing climate-related international migration is its complexity. The links between the adverse effects of climate change on the one hand – which are often hard to implicate – and human movement on the other, are myriad and often multi-causal. Forced displacement from sudden-onset, extreme weather events like floods and storms – some of which can be attributed to climate change -- displace an average of 25 million people annual. In 2016 three times as many people were displaced by weather-related disasters than by conflict. While many disaster-displaced persons are able to return home in a relatively short period of time, the failure to adequately assist and protect those who are displaced for longer periods, or help them to recover their livelihoods, can lead to cross-border displacement and migration.

In addition, more gradual climate-related changes like rising temperatures and shifting rainfall patterns can act to undermine natural resource-dependent livelihoods upon which hundreds of millions of people depend, especially in the world's poorest countries. At present, short of a disaster declaration, people who resort to “distress” migration in this context are considered irregular migrants. The lack of safe and legal migration pathways leaves them at risk of exploitation, abuse, and other human rights violations.

We're also increasingly witnessing how climate change effects are combining with other factors such as conflict, lack of access to services, increasing food insecurity, and chronic under-development to drive displacement and migration. Fragile and conflict-ridden states are particularly vulnerable. I just returned from Somalia where close to 800,000 people have been displaced over the last seven months alone due to protracted drought exacerbated by conflict and

limited government capacity to respond. Scarcity over natural resources can also aggravate pre-existing social and ethnic tensions and lead to armed conflict.

Over the longer-term, accelerated coastal flooding and erosion, salt-water inundation of freshwater sources, and sea level rise will render certain areas uninhabitable, necessitating permanent retreat inland or international migration. Here in the U.S., this is already occurring among communities from Florida to Alaska.

In all of these contexts, the very geographical, social, economic, political, and cultural factors that render certain groups more vulnerable to climate change, also put them at increased risks of forced migration. This is true for indigenous groups, small-scale subsistence farmers who rely entirely on rain-fed agriculture to survive, inhabitants of informal urban settlements (slums) who lack secure land rights, and millions of others who have little to no responsibility for the climate crisis.

At present, there are no global estimates for the exact magnitude of the problem. However, a few things are clear: The first is that the extent of future displacement and migration stemming from climate change will depend on the extent to which we act today both to effectively address climate change, and to support the most vulnerable communities to adapt. Second, given that a certain amount of warming is already “locked into” the atmosphere and will continue to affect human mobility in the future, we must adapt the existing operational, legal, and institutional frameworks to incorporate climate change by providing for safe, legal pathways for people to move in the context of climate change.

In terms of addressing climate change and disasters as drivers of involuntary and unsafe migration, there are clear ways forward. The GCM must include commitments by states to: (1) reaffirm their commitments under the UNFCCC and the Paris Climate Change Accord to effectively address anthropogenic climate change, limit warming to 2°C, and to provide funding to support least developed countries to adapt; (2) better protect and assist those displaced internally by disasters and climate change-related events, with the aim of supporting them to restore their livelihoods; and (3) incorporate climate displacement risk into national development plans, climate change adaptation strategies, and disaster risk reduction strategies in order to meet their duty to protect their inhabitants from the foreseeable consequences of climate change.

But addressing drivers alone will not be sufficient. The GCM must identify new mechanisms and pathways for migration in response to natural disasters and climate change that fully safeguard the human rights of affected populations. The Platform on Disaster Displacement and its partners are already making headway in this regard, for example by enhancing the use of humanitarian protection measures in Central America for people forced to cross borders during a disaster like a hurricane or acute flood (e.g., temporary protection status).

It is also encouraging to see how refugee responses have been flexible in recognizing the complex drivers of displacement as was the case during the 2011 drought and famine in Somalia. However, six years later, the country is in the throes of an even more severe drought, and the continued emphasis by host countries and UNHCR on pushing tens of thousands of Somali refugees to return home in the midst of the drought and without a sustainable livelihood is not a durable solution.

Finally, the glaring gap in the international legal protection framework for people who are at risk of permanent displacement from climate change, including the inhabitants of small island states, signifies a failure of the current international protection architecture – not to mention a deeply concerning lack of political will among the international community to address the threat to human rights and state sovereignty that climate change presents.

In closing, the Global Compacts present a timely and critically important opportunity for states and the international community to adapt the current operational and legal frameworks and mechanisms for displacement and migration to the new realities of the 21st century, while at the same time reinforcing the sustainable development goals and safeguarding human rights. This will require first and foremost political commitment and responsibility-sharing, and second, the need for flexible and adaptive bi-lateral and multi-lateral humanitarian protection and migration arrangements.

Thank you.